

CHAPTER 3

JUMP RACING

Introduction

3.1 Considerable concern was expressed to the Committee by RSPCA and ANZFAS regarding races involving horses jumping over steeplechases or hurdles. The objection to jump racing is that its fatality and injury rates are unacceptably high.

Opposition to Jump Racing

3.2 RSPCA (NSW) is opposed to jump racing. The Society observed:

The high incidence of injuries to horses engaged in this type of racing, underlines RSPCA policy of complete opposition to steeplechase and hurdle racing.¹

3.3 RSPCA (NSW) calls for the immediate banning of jump racing. In Victoria and Tasmania, where the industry is most developed it recommends that jump racing to be phased out over three years. RSPCA (Vic) takes the same stance and has, in fact, incorporated its objections to jump racing into its charter.²

3.4 RSPCA (Vic) conceded that several improvements have been made to jump racing. These improvements have included changing the height of jumps, the style of jumps, the placing of jumps, the training of horses and the training of jockeys. According to the Society the incident rate has remained constant despite these changes.

3.5 The banning of jump racing was also recommended by ANZFAS. According to ANZFAS:

The most dangerous form of horse racing is jump racing and the statistics on injuries and fatalities in such races continue to provide evidence of this.³

3.6 ANZFAS summarised its views on the inherent problems associated with jump racing. The Federation states:

The combination of fatigue, pre-existing injury, speed, jumping under pressure and errors of judgment by both horse and jockey contribute to the higher risk of injury and death to the horse in a jump race than in other forms of horseracing. The horse, when racing in a jump race, is confronted with the task of galloping at full speed and being forced to clear obstacles of considerable height whilst being surrounded by an excited group of other horses attempting the same. To avoid injury or death the horse must clear each obstacle with an accuracy that is difficult when galloping at high speed. Overtaking at the jump can precipitate a potentially fatal situation if one or more horses fall, thereby obstructing the path of those following.⁴

3.7 An additional factor that RSPCA (NSW) presented was that jump racing in Australia is more amateurish than flat racing or trotting. This is a reflection of the size of the industry. The Society explained:

The industry is hardly self-sustaining: the prize money is not large enough for the number of animals in training, and the number of people who are adequate trainers of these animals is not large enough to sustain an industry, so you will tend to find that amateur trainers, amateur riders and so forth, become involved in this type of industry.⁵

3.8 Other factors were identified as contributing to accident rates. These included the heavier weight of riders and the use of failed flat race horses. Representatives of the jumping race fraternity do not accept this argument. They argue that an unsuccessful flat race horse that is converted to jumping is not by definition an inadequate race horse. As a result of breeding and conformation, the horse may simply be better suited to the longer distances and the slower pace of jump racing. This view is not shared by some racing commentators. For example, the Committee notes the following comment in the *Herald-Sun*, on 14 February, 1991 concerning the running of the horse Rising Fear in a maiden hurdle event at Seymour:

Rising Fear is rising nine. In all his years of racing, including several Melbourne Cups, he has been the racing battler's hero. After 114 starts, he has won more than \$500,000 in prizemoney. Basically he has been as sound as a bell and

that's why he is now running in maiden hurdles - and being beaten. Hurdle racing and steeplechasing are the most disgusting of animal sports in this part of the world. To see a horse like Rising Fear who has done nothing but his best all his life, including a second to At Talaq in the Melbourne Cup, then put over the fences with "featherweights" like 66.5kg on his back is the pits. ... And while Rising Fear is the subject of this article, I speak for all horses who are pushed over the obstacles carrying heavy weights over long distances and being subjected to such unsportsmanlike tactics as half-lengthing, a jockey's method of making his opposition jump too soon, thus bringing the other horse down.

3.9 The Committee was further concerned about fatalities at Oakbank in South Australia. Information supplied to the Committee indicates that three horses died during trials and races over the recent Easter season on the Oakbank track. It was also suggested that fifteen horses have died on this particular track in jump races over the last fifteen years. This year two horses, Nicanpa and Tiger Trap, had to be destroyed after falls at two separate steeple.⁶

Support for Jump Racing

3.10 While acknowledging that the number of fatalities is higher in jump racing than in flat racing, the Australian Conference of Principal Race Clubs insist that it is a legitimate sport. Dr Bourke, the Chief Veterinary Steward from the VRC, restated his view that injuries can occur in "any form of vigorous athletic activity."⁷

3.11 Mr McAlpine of the Australian Bloodhorse Breeders Association also defended jump racing. He stated:

I would have to say to you that there is no difference in a horse being trained for the flat, as far as being looked after and as far as being conditioned, as a horse being trained for a hurdle race.⁸

3.12 Mr McAlpine did not seem to be aware, however, that there was a higher rate of loss of horses in jump racing than flat racing:

I cannot remember. I presume there has been a horse that has been killed or had to be destroyed through a hurdle race; that happens in flat racing too.⁹

3.13 The most extensive defence of jump racing came from the Hunt Clubs Association of Victoria and the Australian Jumping Racing Association. These organisations claimed that the statistics being used by RSPCA misrepresents the situation regarding jump racing.

3.14 These organisations maintain that figures showing a higher fatality and accident rate in jump racing than in flat racing are erroneous. They claim that the figures supplied for flat racing for accidents are underestimated as they do not include horses destroyed or removed from racing following discovery of injuries a day or more after a race. They claim that there would be many such cases and that horses destroyed or sold in such circumstances would not be recorded as victims of racing accidents. In their written submission, they also argue that RSPCA has not included figures for horses destroyed in training for flat racing.

3.15 According to these organisations, the accident figures exaggerate the significance of jumping as a cause of accidents in jump racing. For example, an accident occurring as the horse leaves the barrier or a fall between hurdles should not be counted as evidence of increased risk during jump racing as such accidents could and do occur in flat racing as well.

3.16 In its submission, the Australian Equine Veterinary Association expressed the view that strictly controlled hurdling and steeple chasing is not inhumane. According to AEVA, trainers, jockeys, and horses are all required to show a suitable degree of skill and experience before they are allowed to participate at any of the various levels of competition. Horses that lose their enthusiasm for jumping are usually identified by experienced veterinarians and stewards and have their eligibility to compete withdrawn.

3.17 AEVA registered particular concern about the lack of veterinary presence and strict professional control at some picnic meetings where jumping races are held and at some hunt club meetings where inexperienced and unsuitable horses are allowed to race over obstacles. The submission from the Association also argued that very long steeplechase races, where falls occur due to fatigue, need careful

monitoring and control of the fitness and suitability of horses allowed to compete.¹⁰

Fatality and Injury Rates

3.18 The high fatality rate in jump racing was not disputed by representatives of the jump race fraternity.

3.19 For example, Mr John Myhill, Chairman, Hunt Clubs Association of Victoria, and appearing as a witness with the Australian Jump Association observed:

I, for one would be prepared to say that 2.2 per cent of horses is not an unacceptably large total.¹¹

Later in evidence, Mr Myhill elaborated:

The death rate ... is acceptable, and I am sorry if that offends. I think it is 2.2 per cent. That death rate tends to vary randomly and quite considerably, both amongst flat horses and amongst jumpers. Reverting to your question, if it is 2.2, and it is something around 2.2 forever, I do not think we can do much further about reducing that.¹²

3.20 The Australian Conference of Principal Racing Clubs' submission confirmed estimates that 1 per cent of flat racing horses are killed or destroyed as a result of racing and training accidents while the figure for jumping horses is approximately 2 per cent.

3.21 Information supplied to the Committee indicates that in Victoria where more jump races are held than in other States, an average of 11 horses die in jump races every year. The Committee also received information indicating that the Easter Picnic jumping events at Oakbank in South Australia kill an average of 1 horse each year.

3.22 As noted above, it was recognised by several witnesses and jump racing organisations and animal welfare groups that the fatality and injury rate could not be reduced significantly.

Conclusions

3.23 Based on evidence received during the inquiry, the Committee has serious concerns about the welfare of horses participating in jump races. These concerns are based on the significant probability of a horse suffering serious injury or even death as a result of participating in these events and, in particular, steeplechasing. This concern is exacerbated by evidence suggesting that, even with improvements to the height and placing of jumps, training and education the fatality rate would remain constant. The Committee, therefore, can only conclude that there is an inherent conflict between these activities and animal welfare. Accordingly, the Committee is of the view that relevant State Governments should phase out jump racing over the next three years.

Reservation

3.24 Senators Brownhill, Calvert and Cooney share the Committee's concern about the fatality rate in jump racing. The Senators, however, consider that improvements to jump racing facilities and practices will alleviate many animal welfare problems. Changes should include the bandaging of legs, improvements to jump height, placement and the material used in jumps as well as better training and preparation of horses and jockeys.

ENDNOTES

1. *Evidence*, RSPCA New South Wales, p. S 8202.
2. *Evidence*, RSPCA Victoria, pp. S 8496-7.
3. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. S 8593.
4. *ibid.*
5. *Evidence*, RSPCA New South Wales, p. 8844.
6. *The Advertiser*, 30 March 1991.
7. *Evidence*, Australian Conference of Principal Racing Clubs, p. 8983.
8. *Evidence*, Australian Bloodhorse Breeders Association, p. 8863.
9. *ibid.*, p. 8864.
10. *Evidence*, Australian Equine Veterinary Association, p. S 8314.
11. *Evidence*, Australian Jumping Racing Association, p. 9211.
12. *ibid.*, p. 9215.